

CHICKEN STEALING

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The following is by Buddy Smith, *Heads Up!* June 22, 2012:

I became a pastor in 1966, at the grand old age of 22 years. I was only saved for three years and green as grass. My sweetheart graduated from high school on a Tuesday night, we were married on Friday night, I was ordained on Sunday afternoon, and was in my first pastorate by the next Wednesday night with my beautiful new bride by my side. Needless to say, we learned on the job.

We had about eight or ten teenagers in that little hillbilly church near Galena, Missouri, in the Ozark mountains. They were normal kids, as full of mischief as kids usually are. Johnny, Ricky, and Charlie often spent Sunday afternoons wandering the hills near town and we would pick them up for church on the way through town. I was aware that there was some borderline flirtation/romance going on between those boys and one of the girls and was concerned that it was getting a bit out of hand so I decided to preach on the dangers of dating and petting, etc. In fact, I had preached on the subject a couple of times previously, and felt that I needed to beat that drum again, only a bit louder one Sunday night.

Preachers are never able to explain just why they build their sermons the way they do, but that night I decided to begin by telling the story of the little Negro church that called a new pastor. His ministry among them had an unusual bent. You see, every sermon he preached, week after week, sermon after sermon, from whatever text, had to do with chicken stealing. It made no difference where he started, he soon proclaimed the evils of chicken stealing and admonished and exhorted the congregation to repent of all their plundering of henhouses. Easter sermons, and Christmas sermons, and Mothers Day sermons, and revival sermons, and brotherhood meetings, prayer meetings, youth meetings, and Baptist Women's Missionary Union meetings all got the same proclamation, "You all got to give up stealing them chickens!!!" This went on till the whole county knew what the preacher was going to preach next Sunday. Finally, one Sunday morning when the pastor announced the title of his sermon to be "The Painful Perils of Pilfering Poultry", one of the old deacons stood to his feet and cleared his throat. He said, "Brother Preacher, you know how much the congregation loves you and your missus. We do appreciate you coming to live among us and watching over us like a shepherd. So it is with great reluctance and hesitation, and in the fear of the Lord, I have been delegated the awesome responsibility by the members of the church to ask you one question." His voice fell silent, and after a minute the pastor asked, "Bro. Deacon, what is the question?" The old deacon replied, "Pastor, do you have any other sermons besides preaching against chicken stealing?" And the pastor answered, "Yes, Bro. Deacon, I do. And when you folks quit stealing chickens I will preach on something else."

I began my sermon that night with that illustration, intending to preach again on the dangers of dating. It was soon apparent that I had their undivided attention. All the young people listened closely as I exposed the dangers of flirtation and romantic involvement, and preached to them about how easy it is to fall into sinful, immoral conduct. When I finished the sermon and gave the invitation, every teenager in the church responded. I prayed with them one by one and asked God to help them to keep themselves pure, and we closed the service and started for home.

I was feeling pretty good about that sermon. Since we picked up most of the people that attended, we had to take them home afterward. Johnny and Ricky were the last ones we dropped off, and just before we turned in their gate, Johnny asked, "Preacher, I want to know something. How did you know we stole that chicken this afternoon?" Before they climbed out of the car they explained that they had spent the afternoon wandering along the railway line, and had gotten hungry and sneaked into a farmer's barnyard and stole one of his chickens, wrung its neck, plucked it and cooked it over a campfire and ate it. Of course, they were amazed when their preacher started his sermon with that story about stealing chickens. And that was why, when the invitation was given, they all came forward to repent, not of immoral conduct, but of chicken stealing.

The preacher learned a lesson or two that night. I learned that people don't always hear what you preach, but may hear something else entirely. I learned that God does guide the preacher if he is willing, but may not tell him where he is guiding him. I learned not to count your chickens when they respond to an altar call. But it is a good idea to count them at night before you lock up the hen house.

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